

Fed rejects county's magnet high school proposal

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The federal government rejected a \$3.2 million proposal to convert three Montgomery County high schools into magnet schools in the coming years, according to Marshall Spatz, the director of management, budget and planning for Montgomery County Public Schools. The \$3.2 million from the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program would enable the school district to bring magnet curricula to Wheaton, Watkins Mill and Thomas Edison high schools, which are attended predominantly by minority students.

“Our budget was cut \$98 million this year, so there’s certainly not extra money lying around,” Spatz said. The federal Department of Education gave \$100 million to 36 school systems across the country to create magnet schools that will “desegregate” schools with “racially lopsided populations,” according to the department’s press release.

About 80 percent of students at Wheaton, 70 percent at Watkins Mill and 67 percent at Thomas Edison are black or Hispanic.

The proposal submitted by Montgomery County included turning Watkins Mill into the International Baccalaureate School of Engineering, Digital Design and Performing Arts. The move would be meant to counter the fact that Watkins Mill has suffered the highest rate of student withdrawal from school among all county high schools, according to Spatz.

MCPS also proposed merging Wheaton and Thomas Edison high schools, which are located next to each other, and overhauling them into “technology” high schools, according to Spatz. The result would have been a school offering advanced high-tech instructional programs for preparing students for the technology labor market. Thomas Edison High School is already a half-day vocational school and nearly one-third of the school’s students are special needs students. Spatz said Thomas Edison may still receive funding for some changes to the school’s 19 technology-education programs.

“You can realign other resources within the budget to accomplish some of our initial goals,” Spatz said. But some Thomas Edison parents may be relieved that the money did not come through after many of them spoke out against the proposal earlier this year, claiming that the merger would compromise the quality of special education.

“Enrollment is down at Thomas Edison, and we need to be recruiting more students,” said Erick Lang, associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction, at a Special Education Advisory Committee meeting.